HUMAN-ANIMAL STUDIES

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BRILL

CHAPTER 4

Too Many *Onças*: Taxonomical Dilemmas among the Karitiana in Southwestern Brazilian Amazon

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Abstract

The Karitiana, an Amerindian people in the southwestern Brazilian Amazon, mention the existence of many types of *onças* (jaguars) with whom they inhabit the world. While many are not recognized by scientific or popular/regional zoology, they are part of the world experienced by the Karitiana (and other Amazonian peoples). This article suggests that these Karitiana *onças* should be understood through the intersection between the experience and detailed knowledge these Indigenous people have of the territory in which they live, and the enormous richness and complexity of the world and the forms of life that exist. Rather than simply arguing that the Karitiana know a world that science cannot know (because of ontological and/or epistemological differences), the suggestion is that the world is so rich and has so many facets that there are countless ways of observing and understanding it.

Keywords

jaguars – taxonomy – ontology – Karitiana – Amazonia – knowledge

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> There are greater differences between a plough horse or draft horse and a racehorse than between an ox and a plough horse.
>
> GILLES DELEUZE, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*

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1 Introduction

There is a surprising number of *onças* in Indigenous Amazonia. The anthropological literature written in Portuguese refers to *jaguares* rather than *onças* (where both words mean jaguars), since most Brazilian ethnologists use the former term (a masculine noun originally from the Tupi *ya'wara*, which is used in European Portuguese and standard English) rather than the latter, which is more common in Brazilian Portuguese (a feminine noun, from the Greek *lyqx* and the source of the Latin *luncea* and Italian *lonza*).[1] Although there are many jaguars and few *onças* in the ethnographic literature (and, unfortunately, fewer and fewer of the animals themselves in our neotropical ecosystems), the Karitiana present an interesting alternative on this topic. The Karitiana (*Yjxa*) are a Tupi-Arikém-speaking Indigenous People who live in seven villages outside the capital of the state of Rondônia, Porto Velho, in the southwestern Brazilian Amazon (see Figure 4.1); today they number approximately 450. In their experience of the world, there is, in fact, an excess of *onças* (at least from a scientific zoological point of view); the Karitiana acknowledge not just one 'type', but several in their own language, which as we shall see can be difficult to translate. The Karitiana use the term *tipo* (type) in Portuguese to designate the existence of certain beings that are recognisably different from others. It is generally used in expressions such as '*o gato-maracajá é* [um] *tipo de onça*' ('a margay is a type of a jaguar'). These analogies are sometimes also signalled with the expression '*X é parente*' ('X is kin'): '*o gato-maracajá é parente da onça*' ('the margay is kin to the jaguar').

This article discusses the apparent, unexpected proliferation of these beings in the world of the Karitiana at a sort of frontier between the real and the fantastic, between the regular and the monstrous, at a point where the world surprises us with its rich, multifaceted, unexpected possibilities. The hypothesis is that the attention paid by the Karitiana (like other Indigenous Peoples around the world) to diversity, and the variety of nonhuman animal forms that inhabit the world, leads them to divide the world differently, establishing within it discontinuities which are different from those recognized by both scientific taxonomy as well as from other non-Indigenous classification

1 This is in line with the *Novo Dicionário de Língua Portuguesa* by Aurélio Buarque de Holanda. Note that, in early usage, the Tupi term came to designate the introduced domestic dog (a case of 'marking reversal' *sensu* Brown, 1999), resulting in the jaguar being designated *jawara –ete* or *jaguaretê*, as is still heard in certain parts of Brazil (for example, in the 1962 story by Guimarães Rosa 'Meu tio, o Iauaretê'), which reflects the prevailing use in the centre-north region of Minas Gerais.

systems. One example of such systems is Brazil's regional folk-taxonomy, which uses a kind of hybrid language (including Indigenous as well as Portuguese terms, with many animal names derived from native languages) that is also used by the bilingual Karitiana, and as we shall see, is a product of the encounter between Indigenous and European knowledge in colonial Brazil. The objective is to suggest that the world and its creatures comprise such a staggering variety and diversity of forms and agencies that directly impact the perceptions human groups have of them. Combining Amerindian ethnology and anthropological studies on the relations between human and nonhuman animals can make significant contributions to both fields, which for the most part remain separate.

Taxonomically speaking, *onças* (*Panthera onca*; Linnaeus, 1758) are carnivorous mammals of the family Felidae; they are the only large cats in the genus *Panthera* native to the western hemisphere (Johnson, 2016, p. 7). They are the largest and most powerful predators in the Americas, where they ranged extensively in the past (from the southern United States to the southern central region of Argentina and Chile, and throughout all of what is now Brazil). However, their numbers have been decimated by indiscriminate hunting for their pelts (which despite bans still garner high prices in the luxury fur market), out of fear, or to protect domestic animals and, ultimately, people. Note that the term *onça* (in this text and in general discourse) refers to an animal which is spotted, even though Brazilian vernacular speech uses the same term to refer to dun-coloured cats of other species – *Puma concolor* (the cougar), known in Portuguese as *puma* or *suçuarana*, and other smaller native felines: the ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*), the margay (*Leopardus wiedii*, see Figure 4.2), Geoffroy's cat (*Leopardus geoffroyi*), the oncilla (*Leopardus tigrinus*), the jaguarundi (*Puma yagouaroundi*), and the pampas cat (*Leopardus colocolo*) (Emmons & Feer, 1997). The first four are frequently designated in Brazil as *onças* (or *onçinhas*, 'little jaguars') since their markings resemble those of the spotted *onças*.[2] In this article, the term specifically refers to *Panthera onca,* a beautiful and ferocious nonhuman animal, a charismatic predator with enormous cultural importance to Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural people in various parts of Brazil, particularly the Pantanal wetlands of Mato Grosso and Amazonia (Gambarini, Duarte, Haberfeld, & Cunha de Paula, 2016).

2 While there is no space to illustrate all the animals mentioned in this text, they can be easily found on the internet or in books and field guides such as Emmons & Feer (1997) and Einseberg & Redford (1989, 1992, 1999).

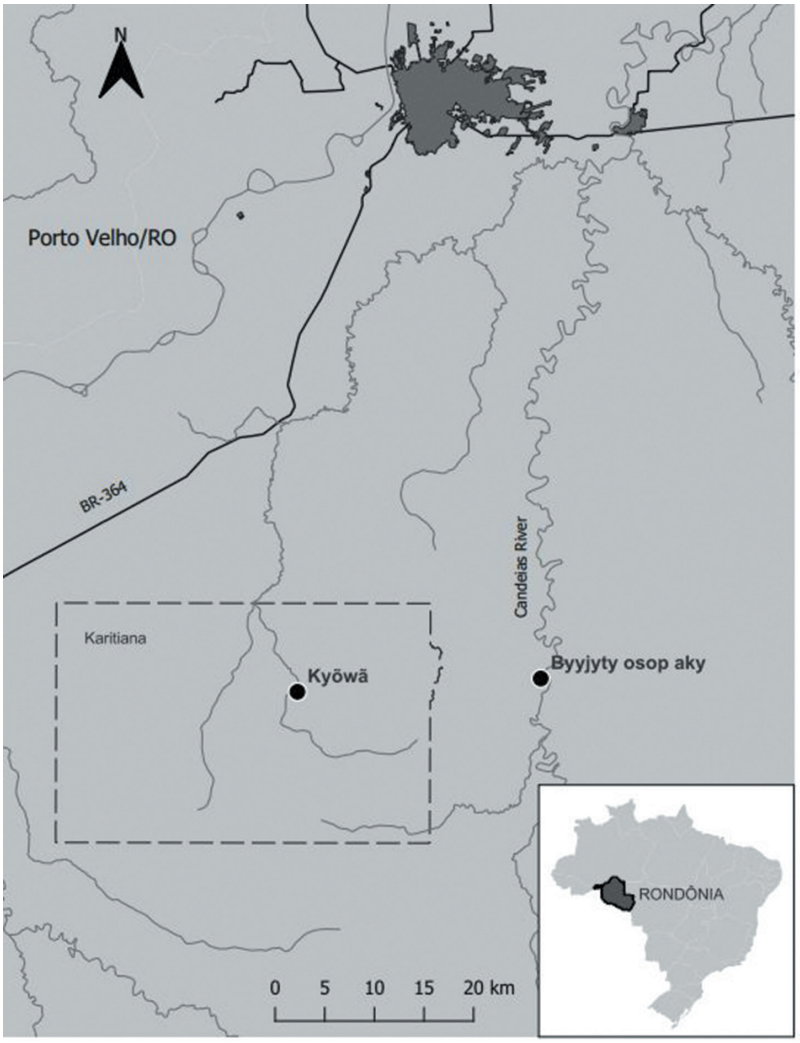

FIGURE 4.1 Map showing the location of the Karitiana Indigenous Land and the two villages where fieldwork was carried
SOURCE: MAP BY WELLINTON COSTA SILVA

The history of the terms is interesting; they can be considered cultural artifacts, since 'species' is a concept stemming from the scientific worldview (the notion of species has consequently come under critical scrutiny from contemporary zoology itself, cf. Pavlinov, 2013; Ritvo, 2018). The etymology of the word 'jaguar' in English, with its obvious Tupi-Guaraní origin, suggests that the taxonomic category was incorporated into European zoological knowledge from South America, from speakers of these languages. This may have occurred via

FIGURE 4.2 Two Karitiana boys exhibiting a head of a margay they have just hunted, *Kyõwã* village, 2003
PHOTO: F. VANDER VELDEN, 2003

Ulrich Schmidl, a German soldier known to have been in the southern part of the continent in the mid-sixteenth century. Schmidl would have heard of these animals from the Guaraní-speaking Indigenous Peoples he encountered in the Bacia Platina region (Schmidl, 2008): 'In a general way, one can say that Guaraní denominations form a well elaborated system and – *cum grano salis* – display a certain resemblance to our scientific nomenclature.' (Dennler, 1939, cited in Lévi-Strauss, 2008 [1962], p. 61). Later, the Swedish naturalist Carl von Linnaeus incorporated the taxonomic category into his binomial system, initially as *Felis onca*, which was later modified to *Panthera onca.* In this way, a zoological species which was already intimately associated with an Indigenous 'species' or 'type' came into being.[3] A portion of the world identified by the Guaraní – a creature designated *yaguar* or *yaguarete* – was borrowed and obviously transformed during the process, by a German explorer and then

3 'The etymology of the word *jaguar* is unclear. Some sources suggest a borrowing from the South American Tupi language to English via Portuguese, while others attribute the term to the related Guarani languages. In the Tupi language, the original and complete indigenous name for the species is *jaguar*, which has been reported as a denotation for any carnivorous animal – in the compound form *jaguareté*, – *eté* means 'true'. In the related Guaraní languages, *yaguareté* has been variously translated as 'the really fierce beast', 'dog-bodied', or 'fierce dog"' (The New World Encyclopedia, available at http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/jaguar#Etymology, retrieved September 24, 2018, italics in original).

a Swedish naturalist, to become another name in a hierarchically organized collection (a taxonomy) within the still-nascent science of modern zoology. Nevertheless, when taken out of its South American ecological and social context and subjected by the totalising language of European natural history (Pratt, 1999), this designation becomes fundamentally altered; it leaves the world to enter the kingdom of words, the pure signs of seventeenth-century science (Foucault, 1994). The native terms (*onça, jaguar*) are nearly encapsulated in the taxon *Panthera onca*—a dialog between local and scientific forms that was common throughout the history of taxonomy (Atran & Medin, 2008, p. 25–28)—although never completely, as we shall see. To paraphrase Maurer (2000, p. 691), and taking for granted an assumed realism which I am unable to discuss adequately here (but which is described by Kohn, 2013), *onças* are *onças* and only certain very specific relations transform them into *Panthera onca* (or into jaguars, *yaguar*, *yaguarete*, or *obaky*).

Here we do not address the specific process which most likely compressed and standardized a group of understandings held among southern Guaraní peoples related to the *onça* (or *yawara*) and other possible correlates into the scientific taxon *Panthera onca.* It is interesting to note that there are also several types of *onça* among the Guaraní (Lévi-Strauss, 2004, p. 83), and that the names of the various species (as they are formally recognized today) appear to have circulated widely across the different continents: just as the term *onça* was used by the Portuguese for the large cats of Africa and Asia (leopard or panther, cheetah, lynxes, caracal), *tigre* (tiger) was used for the jaguars and pumas in southern Brazil and the Andes (Papavero, 2015, 2017). But our main question here is specific to one group and one term: what is this animal or life form we call *onça* to the Karitiana (who use this term rather than *jaguar* when they speak Portuguese), and how did it come to be? Or, in other words, what is at play when the Karitiana discuss this predator which is both feared and respected, materially, and symbolically important in terms of indigenous, popular, and scientific knowledge?

2 Materials and Methods

The data discussed here were collected during various periods of research conducted between 2003 and 2015 in two of the Karitiana villages, *Kyõwã* and *Byyjyty osop aky*, in the north of the state of Rondônia, in the Brazilian Amazon, totalling 13 months of field work. The classic ethnographic method was used, with participant observation, semi-structured interviews (mostly with male hunters spanning 20 to 60 years of age, all bilingual in Karitiana and Portuguese), and long conversations with one or more people, as well as the use

of field guides to identify and discuss nonhuman animal species (Emmons & Feer, 1997, for neotropical mammals).

3 *Onças*, Jaguars and Distinct Types of *Obaky*

When they use the term *onça* in Portuguese, the Karitiana refer to spotted *onças* by default: these are designated by the term *obaky* in their Indigenous language. These animals (sometimes also called *obaky pe'ejema*, '*onça* with a spotted design') are greatly feared, and Karitiana hunters always keep an extra cartridge in their shotguns after a hunt in case of a chance encounter. They say the meat is not suitable for eating ('*não presta*'), which is the case with most carnivorous species throughout the world (Foer, 2010). In general, it is said that *onças* are not *himo* (a Karitiana word designating both 'hunting prey' and 'meat'), although some concede they could be prey but are '*outro tipo*' (another kind), indicating their non-edibility (*him sara*, 'bad meat' or *hima a'oky* 'inedible meat'). My data suggest that *onça* meat is inappropriate for eating for two reasons: first, it causes people to develop a respiratory problem and tire very quickly (*sombyko*, 'without breath') as they go about their activities (because like domestic dogs, *onças* always have their mouths open, panting). Additionally, eating this meat can have fatal consequences because *onças* (also like dogs, the Karitiana say) do not care for their offspring, who 'often die' (here they are contrasted with tayras [*Eira barbara*], which protect their young and consequently can be eaten by the Karitiana). Anyone who eats jaguar meat gets a 'large angry, open wound, a tumour' (*patirity*). Perhaps because *onças* are 'chiefs' (that is, the 'owners' of prey animals, as described below), their 'blood is different', and their meat consequently provokes wounds.

Onças are considered to have a strong smell, like rotten fish (*opira*), which may be related to the many ambiguous associations between *onças* and the dead: *onça* teeth are placed in the mouths of the dead, both men and women, and there are indications that one of the souls of the dead (the Karitiana state that all persons have four 'souls' or 'shadows') leaves the corpse violently and transforms into a huge, very aggressive and cannibalistic *onça* that patrols the perimeter of villages on the silent nights that follow a death. These same feline teeth are highly valued by men, since necklaces made from them are the ideal present for a man to give to his father-in-law; because of these teeth (above all the canines), even small *onças* are always killed whenever they are encountered. The Karitiana say that the necklaces of jaguar teeth used in the *chicha* festivals (rituals in which large quantities of manioc beer are consumed to the

sound of long bamboo flutes) also drink *chicha* and should be fed the blood of prey animals from time to time, for reasons that are unclear.

Nevertheless, many Karitiana say that the most dangerous animals along the forest trails are snakes, above all the *picos-de-jaca* (the popular name for both *Lachesis muta* and *Bothrops atrox*) hidden among the trees; in contrast, they say that *onças* are easily seen in the forest, and when 'carrying weapons [especially firearms] one does not fear *onças*'. What sets *onças* apart is the ferocity of their behaviour – bloodthirsty hunting, eating alone, attacking furtively, or 'seeing without being seen' (Süssekind, 2014) – which makes them the complete opposite of sociable, compassionate, and (ideally) peaceful human beings. These Karitiana notions correspond with how jaguars are considered in many other Amerindian cosmologies from all over South America (Saunders, 1998; Londoño Sulkin, 2005; Santos-Granero & Mentore, 2006; Fausto, 2014, among others).

To a certain extent, the beings recognized as *onças* (including those seen as similar or 'related') by the Karitiana can be individually correlated with zoologically distinct species – which the Karitiana themselves do – although some may not be considered true *onças.* This is the case with the weasel-like tayra (*Eira barbara*), which is technically a mustelid but called the 'black *onça*' (*obaky emo*) by the Karitiana; the crab-eating racoon, a procyonid carnivore (*Procyon cancrivorus*) they call '*onça* coati' (*obaky iri'sa*); and two animals they call 'wild dog', 'fox', or 'wolf that is like a dog', in Portuguese and *kypõn* and *gyryty* in their own language, probably native canine species considered to be 'like *onças*'. Domestic dogs are also considered to be like onças, as has been recorded among other Amerindian peoples such as the Achuar (Descola, 1994, pp. 84–86), the Guaraní (Lévi-Strauss, 2004, p. 83), and the Chané in the Chaco (Villar, 2005). Dogs are *onças*, but are special and different from their counterparts in the forest (*gopit*, 'lives in the bushes'): they are termed *obaky by'edna,* '*onças de criação*', literally translated as, 'nurtured *onças*', 'domestic *onças*', or according to the Karitiana, 'tame *onças*'. This indicates an intrinsic ambiguity of these animals, companions of human beings, which are both sociable and ferocious, docile and predatory (Vander Velden, 2017).

Cougars or 'dun-coloured *onças*' (*obaky somo,* literally 'vermilion *onças*'), feline margays (*obaky ina*, '*onçinha*', 'little *onça*'), as well as domestic cats (*Felis catus*) introduced by the whites (which are also called *obaky ina* but do not appear to be confused with margays by the Karitiana, despite the same name) are also *onças*, as are the 'black *onças*' (*torowoto* or *obaky torowot*, that also should not be confused with tayras, which the Karitiana also call 'onças-pretas' in Portuguese). They also speak of 'large black *onças*' (*obaky ty'emo*), although here the Karitiana classification differs from the zoological taxonomy: to them

black *onças* are different beings than spotted ones, while modern zoology considers both to be the same species with varying concentrations of melanin in their coats.

The intention here is not to definitively equate 'species' of Amazonian fauna with the 'species' or 'types' known to the Karitiana (Vander Velden, 2012); in fact, the quotation marks here indicate the precariousness of the 'species' concept in contemporary discussions. Here this type of equivalence between native types and zoological species is eschewed to avoid deeming the 'species' real or natural and discounting the reality of indigenous perceptions (understanding them only as cultural variations of a scientific reality); even zoological taxonomy recognizes the eminently transitory nature of distinct species (Ritvo, 2018). The Karitiana constantly alter the system, causing a proliferation of these beings, since in their careful attention to the variations inherent to the fluctuations of life and ecologies (as we shall see) they do not seem to establish or consolidate taxa by isolating them from their multiple relationships and potential affections.

4 Animals, Monsters, '*Bichos:*' a Karitiana Bestiary

Indeed, there are many more types of *onças* in the Karitiana world. They describe this assemblage of *onças* as '*tudo bicho*'; *bicho* is a general term in Portuguese that can mean 'beast' or 'bug', but here is used in a different sense to indicate a monstrous being. All these beings are greatly feared for their unpredictable ferocity and have inedible meat: *obaky bijo* ('smelly-monkey-*onça*'), *obaky oromo* ('monkey-*onça*'), *obaky iri'sa* ('coati-*onça*' or 'monkey-coati', since 'its hand is like the coati', mentioned earlier), *obaky poko* ('white *onça*'), and *obaky huj̃ huj̃* ('*onça coisa ruim*', literally 'bad-thing *onça*'). Note that the names of these beings refer to their qualities: to malice ('*coisa ruim*', 'bad thing', is a common name for the Devil in Brazil) and to what we might understand as a mixture of different beings including tree-dwelling animals, monkeys, and coatis. Conjunctions of oppositional animals like predators and prey (Oliver, 2015, p. 242) can signal ambivalences, while this association with animals that mainly live in trees is even stranger considering that they are opposed to *onças* in terms of high versus low: *onças* are the 'owners' (*ongy*) or 'chiefs' of all the prey animals that live on the ground, while the Harpy eagle (*boty'o*) is the owner of those that dwell in the canopy—birds, monkeys and coatis. These tree-dwelling *onças* therefore combine the attributes of high and low, of trees and the ground, as if collapsing the divisions that structure Karitiana ecology

and hunting practices. And, as we know from Mary Douglas (1966), everything that transgresses categories must be distrusted.

But what are these practically cryptozoological creatures? As we have seen, these beings are *onças,* 'another type of *onça*', as the Karitiana would say. But it is precisely this monstrous aspect, the strange combination of different attributes of human and nonhuman beings, of high and low – the classic figure of the monster that appears to be universal or transcultural (Gilmore, 2003) – that allows us to understand the existence of these beings in the world inhabited by the Karitiana. This all points to the fact that what primordially defines Karitiana *onças* is not their morphology, anatomy, embryology, physiology, or their genes. Instead, they are a conjunction of affects; as Viveiros de Castro (1998) has formulated, bodies in Amerindian worlds are less material and more bundles of affects, conjunctions of dispositions that authorize the functioning of beings and their possibilities of action and reaction. In effect, these multiple *onças* are possible in the Karitiana universe because *onças* themselves are monsters, to a certain extent, or as the Karitiana say, *kida* (which they translate into Portuguese as *bichos*).

Bicho (*kida*) is a dynamic and interesting polysemic category. It is generally translated by the Karitiana as 'thing', as in *kida o*, 'fruit' (literally, 'round thing'). The term is used for specific creatures that are effectively monstrous and dwell in the forest or, on dark nights, in the villages. These include the *Mapinguari* (*owojo* or *kida harara*, 'laughing ogre') known in other Indigenous and non-Indigenous Amazonian locations (Vander Velden, 2016); the *Kida huj̃ huj̃* (also known as *Tej̃ tema*), a monstrous winged beast, like a dog with bat wings, that descends to the ground with a canine whine to announce forthcoming deaths (note that this monster arose from an *onça's* tooth that *Botyj̃*, the demiurge the Karitiana translate as God, painted and transformed into a *bicho*); the various forms of *psam'em*, pure white and aggressive cannibal spirits with bared teeth who wander confusedly in the neighbourhoods around cemeteries; the *Curupira* (*Dopa*), also called the 'mother of the forest' (see Figure 4.3); and *Ora*, a monstrous aquatic serpent, the owner of all beings that dwell in the water. But *kida*, the monstrosity, also refers to some animals with aggressive, predatory, or destructive dispositions towards humans: ticks and other blood-sucking animals, electric eels, scorpions, spiders, and *onças.*

The somewhat monstrous nature of *onças* can also be seen in alleged human metamorphosis. The Karitiana say that several techniques can transform a human person into a particularly fierce and bloodthirsty *onça*: drinking the blood of an *onça*; smearing *onça* fat on one's body; eating its raw meat; eating the leaves of a plant (*obaky irisap'*, literally '*onça's* ear'); eating the bark

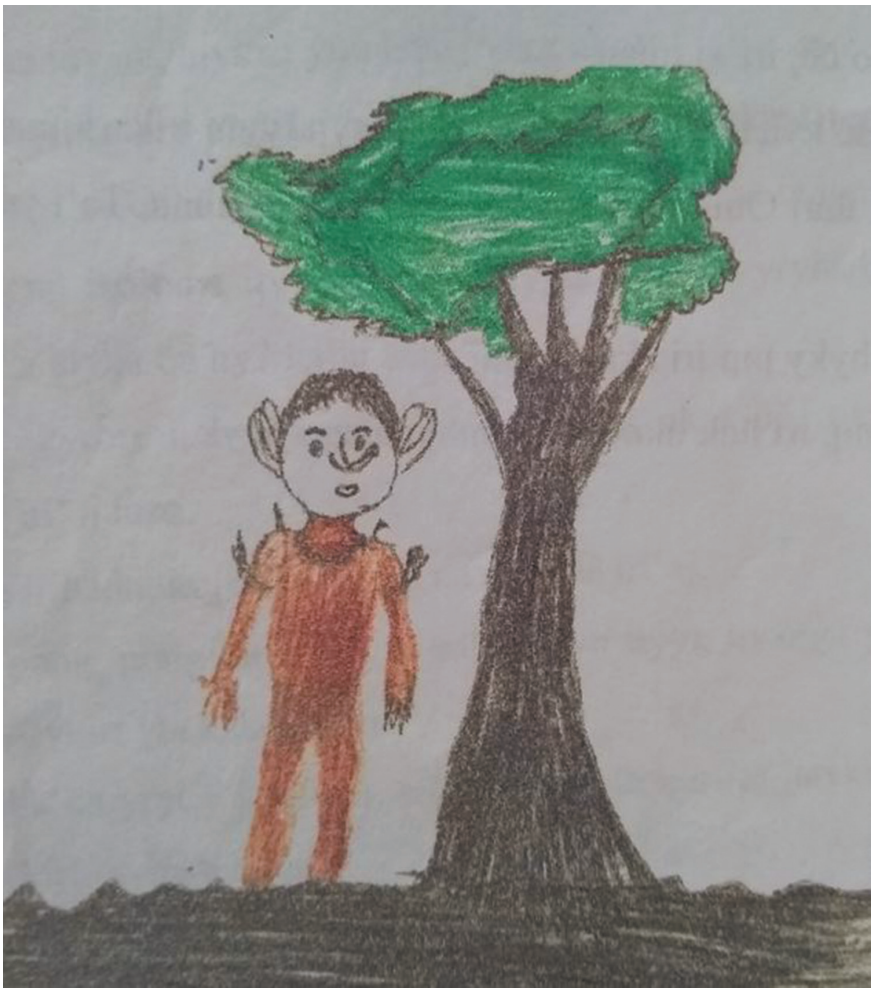

FIGURE 4.3 *Dopa* (the *Curupira*), one of the Karitiana *kida* ('*bicho*', monster/beast). SOURCE: DRAWING BY LUIS CARLOS KARITIANA REPRODUCED FROM ALTINI, 1999, P. 16

shavings of '*pau podre pintado*' (*ep'opokejema go obakydna*, literally, 'painted rotten stick'); or simply marking the body with the juice of the jenipapo fruit to imitate an *onça's* markings (*obaky ejep',* '*onça* painting'). The Karitiana resolutely refused to illustrate the jaguar's markings, even on a sheet of paper. The shaman Cizino once stated that painting the markings of an *onça* on paper would cause the animal to immediately jump out, putting our lives at risk, because the *onça* gets mad at anyone who imitates him, and consequently this is a '*coisa perigosa*' ('dangerous thing') to do. In the past, people used the jaguar pattern only in war and rituals, but they no longer do so today.

Moreover, eating the meat of jaguars makes a person 'heat up quickly:' in other words, to turn aggressive and violent (a 'hot' person's actions and emotions are uncontrolled). It is also said that an enraged person 'has no blood', like the souls of the dead. In the past, Karitiana warriors would make a tea from crushed and roasted *onça* teeth to 'get mad' for war. They reported that the danger of this practice was that the effect took some time to wear off, and could cause the warrior who drank the tea to turn against his fellow villagers: 'He would no longer want to know [human] persons or his family, he would be disgusted by people and would want to kill his relatives', says Valdomiro Karitiana—a classic result of a transformation into a jaguar, a creature that (by definition and principle in the South American lowlands) has no relatives, or does not respect them if it does. Note that the Karitiana never say that this human individual who becomes a jaguar views its relatives or fellow villagers as prey animals when he turns into a predator. Rather, they suggest that because this man-jaguar wants to kill his relatives, he does not recognize them, but he continues to see them as human persons and not nonhuman animals. It is clear that he views humans as prey just as an *onça* does, where he formerly saw human relatives; the point of view for this relationship has been altered.

'The *onça* is where *bichos* begin', Inácio Karitiana once stated; '*Obaky kida*' ('*onça* is a monster'), Epitácio asserted on another occasion, both during my fieldwork in the *Byyjyty osop aky* village. With this, they wanted to emphasize that these animals appear to exist in a zone between 'animal' and 'monster', between the everyday and the extraordinary, between the normal and the unheard-of. As suggested by Praet (2014), perhaps for the Indigenous Peoples of lowland South America, *onças* are what he calls *Monsters* before they are animals (*Beasts*). It is this ambiguity that permits the proliferation of the different types of *onça* that share the world with the Karitiana. They are attentive to the inherent breadth of behaviours, habits, forms, smells, sounds, and emotions of the *onças* of Amazonia: aware of them through many more aspects than those noted by biologists, since their very survival in the forest depends upon coexistence (peaceful or otherwise) with these wild animals. Thus, what to us may resemble cryptozoology among the Karitiana is converted into simple zoology. Perhaps the combination of *onças*, monkeys, and coatis in these beings points towards *onças* that frequent tree branches or share some sort of affect or behaviour with monkeys and procyonids. '*Onças-coisa ruim*' may refer to particularly large or singularly ferocious animals that attack people and frequently devour domestic animals; in the Pantanal of Mato Grosso, ranchers, in conflict with felines that prey on oxen, consider them pernicious animals (Süssekind, 2012).

What is notable is that *onça*-ness is not located in a particular zoological 'species' (*onças*, or jaguars), but rather dispersed across a myriad of beings that

enrich the fauna of the world's largest tropical forest. A similar phenomenon has been seen in another region of Brazilian Amazonia among non-Indigenous river dwellers who also recognize a group of different (and non-scientifically recognized) *onças* (Macedo, Santos, Branquinho, & Bergallo, 2018, p. 130–135). Perhaps, from the Karitiana perspective, *onças* are becomings rather than beings, complexes of different but intimately related creatures which are very difficult or even impossible to separate into condensed entities: a characteristic of certain domains of microscopic life (Helmreich, 2009; Schrader, 2010) but one that appears to be shared by some so-called higher organisms that pose a cryptic challenge to the classificatory desire to locate each creature on an ordered list of discrete species (de Vos, 2017).

5 The Richness of the World

Could it be that the Karitiana recognize more types or species of animals than zoologists specialising in Amazonian fauna? This is a serious possibility, since they know the forest so well, and was confirmed a few years ago: in 2013, field researchers identified a new species of tapir ('a different type of tapir', as the Karitiana say) which the Indigenous People in that region had spoken of for quite some time (the black tapir, *Tapirus kabomani*; see Cozzuol et al., 2013). Or could the contrary be true; that the Karitiana confuse species and varieties of animals, identifying many types where only one or a few exist? Are the Karitiana experiencing the old ethnotaxonomical dilemma between superdifferentiation and subdifferentiation in the relationship between zoological species and native types (Berlin, 1973)?

Perhaps neither is true, and instead the Karitiana recognize beings of different ontological constitutions that interpenetrate and characterize an inherently dynamic taxonomy of animals and *bichos* (*kida*), in which beings are or become *bichos* only on certain occasions, as a result of certain affects and behaviours (such as being aggressive and attacking humans). Even though there is no idea of (and consequently, no word for) animal in the Karitiana language, as in other South American languages (Adelaar with Muysken, 2004, p. 234; Viveiros de Castro, 2006), this does not mean to say that this group does not recognize such a category (with different limits), even covertly, or that they perceive similarities in the beings that are opposed to humans, even though 'each nonhuman species is as different from all the others as it is from humans' (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 226).

Onças are animals, but are also *bichos*: fundamentally ambiguous beings, and in fact located 'where the *bichos* begin'. They are nonhuman animals,

charismatic predators, and also powerful owners of terrestrial animals. The different *onças* that live in the region where the Karitiana dwell thus demonstrate this oscillation between two categories of being, animal and *bicho,* and lead to a proliferation of types. The more that is known about a natural species, the more they are noticed, and the more the diversity of their forms emerges and becomes obvious. In a dynamic classificatory system like that of the Karitiana, the multiple differences are converted into types. The very concept of species as a recognized and stabilized artifact is placed in check ethnographically.

Hence, it seems that the three possibilities suggested by Forth (2017) for the proliferation of certain cats (several not recognized zoologically) among the Nage of the Island of Flores, Indonesia, could be operating in the Karitiana way of recognising the different *onças* (or, at least, more *onças* than those accepted by zoologists) with which they share their territory. Forth suggested the following options: first, the Nage have profound local knowledge of hidden species in the forest that biologists lack; second, fantastic beasts or imaginary beings are present in narratives concerning knowledge of local fauna (although the Nage, like the Karitiana, do not appear to attribute supernatural qualities to these felines); and third, super-differentiation is at play, the recognition of more species where only one is identified taxonomically, a differentiation based on wide variations in animal behaviour or morphology, which could account for the Karitiana way of recognising different *onças* (more than biologists and naturalists accept). However, none of these options alone can explain the Karitiana phenomenon: I suggest that an amalgamation of the three possibilities must be employed to understand the coati-*onças* and '*onças-coisa-ruim*'. At the same time, these beings are not recognized by science, since science does not yet seem to acknowledge the full range of possibilities of being *onça* in Amazonia, including those involving the supernatural – here not in the sense of the fantastic, but rather the monstrous.

In this way, following Hurn (2017, p. 211–212), these Karitiana *onças* could occupy a liminal position (a 'middle ground', in Hurn's words) between the creatures of experience (the real) and the creatures of the imagination, the unknown or the fantastic. They are transgressive creatures, to use Hurn's terminology again. This liminal space is often occupied by animals, that are recognized by science, when they exhibit anomalous behaviour that is either out of the ordinary or has not been described previously. As such, a world of experience opens up, focusing on ways of seeing, feeling, perceiving, and naming the incessant movement of things and beings. *Onças* do, and are capable of, many things: like other living beings, they are extremely rich in potentialities, affects, and almost unlimited gestures. Western zoology lists most of these potentialities as a set of habits, dispositions, or behaviours of one sole animal species,

while the Karitiana seem to prefer multiple types, linking different actions or potentialities to different types of being. In the words of the Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia (2016, p. 3), 'Every animal is a particular form of opening to the sensible, which is to say a certain capacity to appropriate and interact with images'. For this reason, I suggest that the nonhuman animals here are becomings: unlike in western zoology, beings are not 'detached from local ecology and most of the senses' and 'decontextualising nature' (Atran & Medin, 2010, p. 28–29). To the contrary, organising the discontinuities of the world depends on the experiences the Karitiana have with the beings they encounter 'embedded in the local environment', and which they observe doing ever-different things. As a result, they alter the way these beings are classified: a dog is not normally a *bicho* (*kida*), but if it attacks a passerby it could become one. This experience of the world, which preserves yet simultaneously and continuously transforms indigenous knowledge, is permitted specifically because the forests in Karitiana indigenous lands are relatively intact, with animals particularly abundant in the southern, eastern, and western areas farther from the villages.

Ultimately, the world is of a complexity and wealth so absurdly vast that no single human and no single society will ever be capable of understanding it in all its aspects (a point made by Graeber, 2015). Or as Gordon (2003, p. 6, my translation) aptly points out, 'The possibilities of classification and of description within this continuum that is nature are infinite'. The most that each society or culture can recognize of the world, and the things it contains, depends on the angle from which it views them: only some of the riches of the real world are illuminated, while many others are left in the dark (in zones that can become visible, depending on experience or experimentation with the real). This inherent complexity of life forms, and the natural fact that everything changes all the time, and never ceases to surprise us, permits its sheer variety to be perceived in multiple ways; each people, culture, or human collectivity delineates the real in its own way, favouring different manifestations or emergent forms. In the modern West, we have opted for stable categories through the basic concept of species: many differences were initially reduced to reproductive isolation (to species defined in terms of viable descendants), and in more recent times, to genetic maps. Meanwhile, the Karitiana seem to have opted for an inherent instability in the characteristics of living things, thus causing the proliferation of *onça*-ness in their forests as discussed here. There is not just one *onça*, but in a continuum between the house and the forest, between prey animals and beasts, between the natural and the supernatural, as it were. There are different *onças* of various forms, habits, aspects, trajectories, actions, and emotions. Therefore, animals are not just good to think about, to vilify, to

prohibit, and to live with, but also good to multiply. These beings can also be called *chimeric* (*sensu* Severi, 2015), since they seem to combine attributes of different beings while at the same time presenting all of them in a single type: a coati-*onça* expresses and manifests both the *onça*/*obaky* and the coati/*iri'sa.* This 'presentification' indicates that the Karitiana are not using metaphors to connect distinct animals, but rather that these beings are part of their experience in the forest. Various people described having seen, encountered, or even slaughtered these different manifestations of *onça*-ness.

This is not an attempt to reduce one way of knowing the natural world to another: it is not a case of reaffirming the existence of one unique 'natural given' (the species *Panthera onca*), recognized by zoology, which the Karitiana multiply into several. At the same time, this does not mean to say that in fact many *onças* exist, and that modern science erroneously groups such different beings together in the same taxon; it is not that biologists are right and the Karitiana wrong, or vice versa. Instead, as a major challenge to anthropologists wishing to build bridges between Americanist ethology and anthropological studies of human-animal relations, this means recognising that both claims about *onças* and the natural world are correct on their own terms, that they make sense in their own historical and cosmological contexts and are ensconced within their own epistemological traditions. Finally, this situation entails acknowledging that natural beings, neither more-than-human nor less-than-human, but certainly beyond-human (in other words, different from humans), to a great extent lead their lives indifferent to humans and go about their business with no regard for indigenous or scientific taxonomies, even as the entire planet faces the tragic consequences of the Anthropocene era. To paraphrase Butler (2006), beings (like bodies) could be said to possess a history that is not only a social history. Perhaps my proposition here is a sort of material realism, with an assumption of the impermeability of certain objects to human cognition and also to knowledge (Pedersen, 2015).

Each researcher is a product of his or her own ontology; while it is pertinent to ask whether this immersion can be bypassed, including in the contemporary analytical reconfigurations in which natural and social/cultural are mixed in complex and apparently contradictory ways (Wolff, 2012), a perhaps more interesting question remains. If naturalism leaves a part of the world separated from human designs, do animists not do the same (supposing that the Karitiana can be described as animists)? Does this suggestion acknowledge that no one in this world knows everything or recognizes everything? Even if the animals' interiorities (souls) to Amazonian peoples are generally human, can it be supposed that the Amerindians know everything there is to know of

the human phenomenon itself? Do they know everything of themselves? The experience of some anthropologists in the field, involving uncertain, tentative, tantalising, flagrantly invented or frankly mistaken responses to questions like these, would indicate that the answer is no.

It is precisely this independence of 'animal life' – which has been developing, specialising, and diversifying, for millions of years on this planet (before the presence of human beings and far from their activities), and which cannot ever be reduced to an anthropological or scientific object of study – that provides space for the emergence of diversity, for what we label biodiversity (used here without its quantitative connotations). Hence, as any fisherman knows, when human collectives throw their nets of thought and cognition over the natural world, they never know what they will catch – because of 'life's creative powers, of its inexhaustible power of transformation, of its plasticity' (Foucault, 1994, p. 126). The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges stated that hypotheses about the real must be interesting, while the real itself need not be (Borges, 2012, p. 159); perhaps the opposite is true for living things, where the real is so immensely rich and varied that even our most creative hypotheses will never come close to understanding it, nor prevent us from marvelling at all there is to continually surprise us.

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